Gender Inequality: Challenges of Educating the Girl Child

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Abstract

Education today has become an arena of conflict where struggles of the marginalised are taking place. These conflicts relate to aspects of caste, class and, more significantly, gender; girls constitute a larger proportion of the disadvantaged child population in India.

The article attempts to grasp the intersecting process of exclusion of the several girl children from the school system. The strategies adopted by the state to address these issues have tended to be isolated and fragmented. The mere presence of girls in schools is an inadequate indicator of the difficulty they face owing to gender disparities within schools or the gendered environment beyond. A holistic, multi-sectoral development needs to address their specific vulnerabilities.

Keywords

Education, girl child, marginalised, development discourse, disparities

Introduction

Although high priority is placed on education in policy statements in India, this has not necessarily ensured adequate resources or coverage of all marginalised groups in national programmes. Thus, India, with now almost 25 per cent of the global total of illiterates, has female literacy rates much lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. The world's largest number of out-of-school children is also in India, and a large majority of them are girls. The gender gap at the primary enrolment level remains high. These girls begin their lives passed over in favour of their brothers

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for food, medical attention and schooling (Colclough, 1993). Even measures that are concerned only with the presence or absence of girls in school provide little insight into aspects of gender inequalities within schools or the gendered environment beyond schools (Unterhalter, 2006).

It is relevant to view these inequalities in the context of the notion of development and the basic right to education as part of social inclusion. Development, as has been argued by Sharma (2010), is not an obsolete discourse but 'a contentious site' where citizens negotiate for their rights and entitlements and raise critical questions about justice and equality.

And within such a discourse, education also becomes an arena of conflict where the struggles of the marginalised, be they related to aspects of caste, class or gender, are also taking place with a view on more equitable and just distribution. This is happening by challenging the hegemonic definitions of development seen largely in terms of economic growth, for, as many have observed, the advancement of technology and riches around us has failed to touch the bottom half of the world's people and the actual conditions of the poorest have not significantly improved in absolute terms (Shukla & Kaul, 1998).

According to the 2014 Human Development Report (UNDP, 2014), improvement in human development measures has slowed down in the past few years. The human development index (HDI), a measure derived from life expectancy, education levels and incomes, barely grew from 0.700 in 2012 to 0.702 in 2013. India's HDI inched by a meagre 0.5 per cent (less than half a per cent) between 2012 and 2013 from 1.4 per cent in the past two decades. Amongst the 187 countries across the world ranked in terms of HDI, India was ranked at 135. Currently (i.e. as per 2014 data), Indians of 25 years or more have received 4.4 years of schooling on an average compared to a global average of 7.7 years.

Although the allocation for education as a whole in the budget of 2014–15 has gone up by 11 per cent, higher education, especially elite institutions such as the IITs and IIMs, received a quarter of the outlay (₹71 billion of the outlay of ₹687.28 billion), while the real need is for spending on primary education (D'Monte, 2014).

As Jean Dreze has observed, public spending on health and education is only 4.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in India compared with 7 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Even the average of 'least developed countries' is 6.4 per cent. According to the Accountability Initiative of the Centre for Policy Research, expenditure on Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was halved between 2012 and 2014. While the right to work, education, food and information have been advocated, the emphasis on building physical capital is huge as opposed to building human capital. The poor human indices vis-à-vis the India story are indicative of the inequities pervading some sectors, particularly health and education.

When we look at state provisioning of education as a public good, there is enough evidence to grasp the intersecting process of exclusion from the education system of the marginalised, especially the several girl children who cannot access schools at all or drop out due to extremely difficult circumstances or specific vulnerabilities. Girls also constitute a significant proportion of the out-of-school child population in India; their official numbers and an understanding of

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the socio-economic constraints facing them are invisible in existing laws, policies and government records.

In school exclusion, the above constraints also impact on everyday lives of girls and affect their schooling decisions—notably a family's struggle for livelihood, parental illiteracy, negligible academic support at home and societal prejudices and customs. For instance, gender bias resulting in greater burden of domestic responsibilities on girls or social sanctions against education or in favour of early marriage all impede the full participation of girls in school education.

The census of 2011 shows there are 38 million missing women. The boy–girl divide over the past few decades has widened to such an extent that in 2014, there were 7.1 million fewer girls than boys as against 4.2 million in 1991 in the age group of 0–6 years. In 2011, the dropout rate at class 5 for girls was 24.4 per cent, while it was 41.3 per cent at class 8. At the secondary level, the attendance rate of girls was 42.3 per cent as against 52.7 per cent for boys. This difference of 10 per cent is in itself a telling comment on the status of girls in India. The discrimination extends to nutrition and health care. The proportion of male children who are fully immunised is 4 per cent higher than female children (Census, 2011).

Due to the largely patriarchal structure of Indian society, irrespective of castes, religions and socio-economic conditions, the tasks allotted to girls and women within a household reinforce long-held mindsets that view them as natural caregivers—going to school in several cases is not seen as having any obvious benefits and is often regarded as a waste of time (Bhatty, 1998; King & Hill, 1993). Household chores such as cooking, cleaning, sibling care, fetching of fodder and water take up a large part of a girl child's time. Since boys are seen to be future breadwinners in families, even household distribution of food, health care, education and leisure time is highly attuned to favour males. Girls are seen to be less of an asset and more of a liability.

The author's earlier study of Karnataka on the state of primary education (Kaul, 2001) based on the collection of primary data from 93 schools, and also non-school-going children, focused on the gender factor impeding access to education. In the interviews conducted, 74 of the 103 (71.84 per cent) out-of-school girls pointed out that besides the fact that they came from families with low incomes, domestic work, sibling care and parental apathy towards their education kept them away from school. And 41 such girls (39.8 per cent) also stated that their brothers were attending schools while they were compelled to stay at home.

The author's research study further observed that day care centres, that is, *aanganwadis* for preschool children, worked between 9.30 am and 1.00 pm. Even beyond these hours, someone was always required at home to look after younger siblings when both parents worked. The responsibility usually was on the elder daughter. Thus, 95 of the 144 enrolled girls (65.97 per cent) interviewed in government schools did not seem to know until what stage they would be permitted to remain in school by their parents. Even in urban slums, the economically weak, women-headed households prioritised their sons' education over their daughters' 'because sons stay on in the family and will look after us but daughters will get married and go away'. However, ironically enough, the labour of the daughter was considered central to running the household.

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The study also revealed that gender bias stemmed from conditions of poverty: Parents with low-income levels stated that they needed economic incentives to 'spare their daughters for school'. But the picture in Mandya district was different where parents with higher family earnings and rich fertile landholdings preferred engaging their daughters in household work and 'preparing them for marriage'. This reflected the patriarchal mindset towards girls' education.

Gender bias was also seen in the denial of free hostel facilities to girls in the community-based *mutt* school such as the Basaveshwara Higher Primary School in Kanakapura. While professing equality in accessing education, such a situation severely limited the possibility of girls continuing with their schooling.

In some Urdu-medium schools, teachers stated that almost half the girls dropped out after class 4 due to lack of an adequate number of Urdu-medium institutions. Very often, parents preferred the 'madrasa' education, which alone could contribute to the development of *ikhlaq* or character building—it would also prepare their girls for life and marriage.

However, in all the above cases, none of the 155 teachers interviewed indicated that girls were in anyway less receptive or less intelligent than the boys. This could be a critical factor in influencing the parents to break their traditional mindset. But what was lacking was the weaving of gender sensitivity into the system of schooling.

Beyond the First Hurdle

The above study also showed that enrolling girls in school is only the first hurdle. Ensuring continuation is a harder task where progress is constrained by many factors linked to family responsibilities and other issues. The research focused briefly on the lack of toilets in school as an impediment. This observation needs to be viewed in the larger context of an absence of safe environment increasingly felt by parents in both rural and urban areas. The unavailability of basic civic facilities such as toilets seriously affects girls' schooling and leads to a large number dropping out, especially as they reach puberty. A government official in Bangalore stated that constructing a toilet was a more expensive proposition than building a simple classroom. However, Prime Minister Modi in his Independence Day speech in August 2014 has set a one-year deadline to achieve the goal of separate girls' toilets in schools with the help of state governments, because dignity of women becomes society's collective responsibility.

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) (2013) which surveyed 4,000 rural primary schools in 550 districts found that 47 per cent of schools did not have usable girls' toilets. Building them alone without water and maintenance is meaningless. Without a budget to provide a cleaner, maintenance becomes a bigger problem, ultimately leading to the toilets being locked up. The stipulated hand-wash facility near the toilets was available in 55 per cent of the elementary schools and 42 per cent of the secondary schools as per the report of the District Information System for Education (DISE; *The Times of India*, 2014).

This fact has been corroborated in several studies, including a more recent one in 2014 by a group of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on

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health issues called *Bejhijhak* in Delhi, who observed that 71 per cent of the girls are unprepared for their first period cycle and 83 per cent of the school-going girls reported that they faced restrictions during menstruation, especially due to absence of toilets, resulting in many dropping out from school (Bhasin, 2014).

Lack of proper fencing of school boundaries and non-availability of safe transport act as deterrents in girls reaching school, and as Nawani points out, access to school and availability of safe transport are a matter of concern for parents of both boys and girls, but 'these are of far greater importance to girls and their parents' (Nawani, Disha; Reprints http://www.sagepublication.com). They are placed in complex circumstances, and even factors that have a universal bearing on all school-going population have a far greater effect on them.

Safety concerns become critical while being able to enter and continue education in schools, more so in view of the fact that crimes against the most vulnerable, especially children and girls, are on the rise. Whenever brutal cases of corporal punishment and child abuse hit the headlines, there is a frenzied demand for vigilante justice, but there is little effort to address the systemic changes sorely needed to prevent such abuse. These issues are also confronting parents in elite schools. With the demand for better-quality education, schools are mushrooming across different regions and states with little regulation or monitoring.

The abuse is even more difficult to detect and curb in the case of children and girls living on the streets or in government shelters or homes. The periodic monitoring of such institutions is more on paper despite the Child Protection Policy and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act 2013, which has made reporting child abuse cases mandatory.[1]

Hence, we see that the intermeshing of gender relations, location (rural/urban, remote areas), poverty, social discrimination/disadvantage and poor quality schooling 'loads the dice against girls' (Ramachandran & Sharma, 2008).

More recent statistics substantiate and reinforce the findings of the author's earlier study and the positioning of the girl child vis-à-vis education. When we take up enrolments, the percentage of girls in the total enrolment at primary level in 2006–07 was seen to be 48 per cent; this increased a mere 48.5 per cent by 2009–10. The gender parity index (GPI) at the primary level rose marginally from 0.93 in 2006–07 to 0.94 in 2009–10. As per the Selected Educational Statistics (SES) 2008–09, the dropout rate at the primary level was 24.9 per cent and it was 42.2 per cent at the elementary level. The elementary dropout rate of scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) girls remains high at 47.8 and 58.3 per cent, respectively. Rural/urban divides are also significant, where again girls outnumber boys on the dropout scale (Twelfth Plan Elementary Education Paper, 2011).

Contrasting Policy Intentions and Ground Reality: Fragmented Strategies

Given the complex and chronic nature of inequality and exclusion, the strategies adopted so far have tended to be somewhat isolated and fragmented (RTE-SSA Framework, 2010). The law under Right to Education (RTE) Act provides a justiciable framework that entitles all children between 6 and 14 years free and

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compulsory education. There has been no dearth of policy recommendations such as providing schools within walking distance, appointing more women teachers, introducing flexible timings and also supporting alternative modes of schooling. For example, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme provides residential schools at upper primary level to girls from SC, ST, other backward class (OBC) and minority communities. The Mahila Shikshan Kendras are residential schools run through the Mahila Samakhya programme initiated by the Government of India in the mid-1980s meant to awaken and empower adolescent girls through education as a dynamic process of learning in which girls and women gain access to meaningful information and also avail of vocational training/basic life skills. SSA supported alternate schooling facilities in the form of centres under the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS) and Alternative and Innovative Education (AIE) to make available education to children from disadvantaged sections, especially in un-served habitations. These children have not necessarily been mainstreamed into full-time schools because the EGS and AIE centres were only transitory measures to provide schooling until ‘regular, full time schooling facilities could be provided in the areas concerned’ (RTE-SSA Framework, 2001).

Thus, we find the ground reality very different from policy intentions stemming from various reasons. State funding has remained woefully inadequate. Largely poor students, amongst them even fewer girls, try to learn within a poorly funded structure, which makes it difficult for them to break the shackles of illiteracy and poverty (Ramachandran et al., 2001).

While political parties have articulated their desire to see education as a tool for social transformation and empowerment of the marginalised groups, serious political will seems lacking. Neoliberalism, which is the cornerstone of the contemporary development discourse, policy and practice, ‘constructs the market as the universal panacea, delivering people from poverty’ (Gurumurthy & Batliwala, 2012). The ‘feminised state’ that provides care and security to its people is perceived as a drag on the economy; the masculine state has a techno-managerial role that minimises welfare such as education and health.

Hence, we see that political parties clamouring for state power do interfere in the arena of education only to gain political mileage or control, and they may often mould or alter course content to suit their own perception of nationalism or regional fervour, but seldom do they intervene to alter caste, class, rural/urban or gender divides.

Therefore, several government initiatives have ended up as programmes precluding serious civil society participation. More importantly, as Dreze and Sen (1995) have pointed out, ‘In India, both ancient and modern biases shape our politics, reflecting prejudice of class divisions as well as of traditional cultures.’ The difficulty of getting even left-wing parties interested in combating inequalities in education relates to the general social atmosphere in India, where some major disparities are simply taken as given and not particularly worth battling against.

The Social Mindset

Hence, the gender divide continues to persist. Despite positive legislation, there has been serious neglect of emphasis on changing the social mindset, especially

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the conviction that girls and boys are equal. Female foeticide is a harsh reality, and early marriage of girls prevents their access to education even further. The sex ratio in Delhi itself has been dismal. In 2011, it was 866 females to 1000 males. The average of India was 940:1000 in 2011 (Census, 2011). The laws pertaining to marriage and employment during childhood are gender-blind and contradictory, and as Kumar observes, there is an urgent need to examine how economic conditions, the cultural ethos and weak schooling work together: 'Especially at the elementary level, schools are too poor themselves to provide an alternative to the ethos at home' (Kumar, 2014).

Intersectionality of Gender: From Girlhood to Womanhood

Gender does not operate in isolation but in conjunction with other social categories, resulting in girls having to experience multiple forms of disadvantage. The dimensions of location (rural/urban), caste, class, religion, ethnicity, disabilities and so on intersect with gender to create a more complex reality. Also, gender cannot be understood in quantitative terms alone. As has been observed by Unterhalter (2006), gender so far has been viewed as merely the number of boys and girls progressing through a school system. This approach to 'measure gender' does not provide information on the ways in which equality or inequality links with other dimensions of human flourishing, for example, health, access to decision-making, the labour market or income. Gender then is not a stand-alone category not related to other forms of discrimination. The inequalities faced by a girl child extend to adult life in various ways.

The larger gender gap in levels of education (Visaria, 2006) results in women's powerlessness in decision-making at home. Illiterate women are also caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, childbearing and ill health. At workplace, women without education are engaged in low-paid, irregular wage employment and longer working hours. In public arena, they face scant attention from providers of health care or other services and little political representation.

Analysing inclusive neoliberalism, Bedford (2007) has argued that feminism should attempt to grasp the complexity of current drifts in economic restructuring. While encouraging institutions necessary for free markets to flourish since the mid-1990s, the World Bank, for example, also emphasised on inclusion of the marginalised and social equality. The recognition of the uneducated poor women's economic efficiency has helped to instrumentalise the gendered nature of social reproduction (through child care, care for the elderly, household work) that is so imperative for markets to function (John, 1996). On the one hand is lack of access to education, and on the other is the emphasis on gender equality, which only brings into focus how the paradox in development discourse gets defined by the market ethic (Gurumurthy & Batliwala, 2012). In such situations, the illiterate and uneducated womenfolk are unable to free themselves from the bondage of poverty and other related disparities.

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While a girl child has to bear the brunt of harshness of discrimination as against a son in most homes, moving on from girlhood to womanhood, women also in urban setting with high-profile jobs have to pay a higher price for professional success that men never have to. In trying to manage boardrooms and million-dollar deals, they are still expected to see what is cooked for dinner, whether the linen has been laundered and children's homework and projects are completed in time. Good housekeeping as their prime role remains unchanged. Indra Nooyi, the PepsiCo CEO, aptly summed up the gender roles through her remark that professionally able women also can't have it all' (Dutt, 2014). Although the corporate world does offer opportunities to women, it is still tough for them to break the proverbial glass ceiling, resulting in under-representation of women at the top level across boards. Moreover, with deeply entrenched stereotyped roles, successful women too also find it hard to take men along in their effort to negotiate for a more level playing field at work and at home.

Engaging with the Gender Divide: The Way Forward

In view of the impact of gender disparities resulting from unequal access to education, curriculum and textbooks, pedagogic practices need to capture the entire web of social and economic relations and determine an individual's location in the social reality that shape girls' life experiences. There is a gendered environment that extends beyond schools and needs to be dealt with.

Efforts pertaining to gender have focused on females, but if such divides have to be treated as systemic issues to transform unequal gender relations, it would be equally critical to include boys and men more significantly in this process. Sensitising teachers to issues of cultural and religious diversities is also important.

The most disadvantaged groups are urban-deprived girls, those engaged in child labour and domestic work and those in very poor slum communities and uprooted urban habitations. They are the most excluded. As has been observed by Unterhalter, achieving gender equality has to be linked with multi-sectoral development and often with popular mobilisation in support of political, economic and social demands, particularly with regard to education, health and sustainability.

Forming support groups and safety nets for girls without adult protection and for those working as domestic help as well as co-ordination of interventions across departments are imperative. Local body and civil society initiatives and private sector (with corporate social responsibility) partnerships with NGOs and municipal bodies, monitoring by parents in schools, collaborating with community and local authorities and focusing on access and quality education could all act as steps and sustain measures towards greater participation and inclusion of girls in education, break social barriers that reinforce patriarchal structures and move in the direction of gender equity.

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Note

1. In 2012, The National Crime Records Bureau, Government of India and the Census Report of 2011 pointed out that there were 12,363 cases of child rape in 2013 as against 8541 cases in 2012. There were 809 cases of procuration of minor girls in 2012, and these increased to 1224 in 2013. The conviction rate of such crimes was 31.5 per cent in the same year.

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